WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY THE HONORABLE ALBERTO M. FERNANDEZ

It is an honor to have been asked to address this Committee. For most of my 32 year career as a Public Diplomacy Officer in the U.S. Foreign Service, serving mostly in the Middle East and the Muslim world, the great and continuing challenges presented by the juxtaposition of the power of media, radicalization, and political violence have been most salient in much of my work.

As Vice President of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), I am fortunate to have joined an independent institution which has for almost 20 years been in the forefront of documenting and analyzing political, social and intellectual currents in the Middle East, including the rise of terrorist groups like ISIS, al-Qa'ida, Hamas and Hizbullah and their use of media, and especially social media, for propaganda purposes. MEMRI continues to meticulously document the latest twists and turns of the extremist narrative, bridging the language gap for Western audiences with translated primary material in Arabic, Turkish, Farsi and other languages.

Radicalization and terrorism is nothing new in the world. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, influential individuals such as the anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin popularized the concept of the "propaganda of the deed," that the best way to demonstrate the importance and power of a political idea was to show it by concrete action, preferably by violent action. "We must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda, " Bakunin wrote in 1870.

As scholarly studies such as the 2013 Rand Europe report on radicalization in the West have shown, social media alone is not the creator or reason for radicalization but merely a very powerful and effective accelerant. Social media takes concepts and actions already present in the real world and rapidly disseminates it to a willing and receptive audience. It is a powerful idea which seemingly has real effect in the actual world and which can then be dynamite in the virtual world.

It is the narrative that gives power. This has certainly been the case throughout history when people have been motivated by great causes, many of them political or religious, some of them truly evil, to give all they had in the fulfillment of goals that to us clearly seem odious. When we think of something like Leni Reifenstahl's repulsive yet compelling 1935 documentary "The Triumph of the Will, " we are conscious of the technical quality, of the power of images, AND of an ideological worldview that for millions of Germans at a particular time and place seemed particularly potent and seductive. Reifenstahl's skill added to the power of the message but it was the message itself that was the wellspring of that evil. So it is with social media today, which makes certain messages in certain spaces appealing to specific audiences easy to see and seemingly difficult to remove.

While the narrative of some terrorist groups are tied to a specific political narrative such as Hamas or Hizbullah, both albeit with a strong Islamist component, there are few narratives as ambitious and as aggressive as that of the Islamic State. This is a complete package which

includes a strong ideological component deeply rooted in a specific Salafi Jihadist reading of the period of formative Islam, a political project which is seemingly a going concern, and a 21st century appeal to substantive and consequential participation aimed at youth searching for purpose and identity in a seemingly aimless, empty and hedonistic world.

Indeed, one can marvel at the fact that so few have been motivated to join up with the mesmerizing siren call of this revolutionary vanguard offering purpose, violence, sex, the end of the world, and fulfillment in the path of God rather than so many. Despite the relatively small numerical appeal of ISIS within the context of the number of Muslims worldwide, its impact has been tremendous when coupled with that toxic accelerant which is social media.

So we have a message that is difficult for governments, both in the East and the West, to counter directly. And you have an on the ground political reality, in Libya, in Nigeria, and especially in the ISIS heartland in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, that gives the propaganda the necessary mooring it needs in the real world. What are the logical steps to be taken in confronting this uniquely potent propaganda challenge?

Obviously, changing the political reality on the ground is one sure way of rapidly reducing the impact of the propaganda. The shiny, soaring, scary object that was "Triumph of the Will" had tremendous appeal in its heyday of the mid-30s, it had less so in the rubble of German cities in 1944-45. The gap between the propaganda and the reality was too wide to be breached by celluloid. An ISIS Caliphate who predicates that it will conquer Constantinople, Rome and America "by the permission of God," is unmasked if it cannot hold Tel Abyad or Raqqa or Mosul.

But given the difficult political-military reality and the difficulty in identifying on the ground alternatives to the Islamic State, what are practical steps which can be taken now to mitigate the appeal of the Islamic State and to at least try to put a blanket on that accelerant which is social media?

On a strategic level, governments must identify ways to combat the basic pillars of Jihadist Salafism which is the breeding ground from where this ISIS pathology emerges. It is important to point out that this worldview does not emerge fully formed, Athena-like, out of nothing but has been promoted by countries like Saudi Arabia – whether officially or unofficially – for decades. Salafism, not all of which is pernicious, has for decades had the cash, the patronage, the protection and the push that other trends and worldviews within Islam have lacked.

But much of the activity in this Salafi sphere does frankly promote a worldview which is very conducive to radicalization, material that is extremely intolerant, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-all sorts of Muslims such as Shias or Sufis or others found insufficiently "Islamic" by this worldview. Once the strategic decision is taken that a key part of the problem is Jihadist Salafism, this can be tackled in a variety of ways.   Some of the best ways to counter this may be through quiet and frank conversation by our diplomats behind the scenes with local interlocutors but this is still something than needs to be prioritized and done.

On the tactical level, there are a series of practical steps that need to be taken to begin to reverse the head start the extremists have built up over the past few years. We need to recognize that

while social media propaganda is not super-expensive, we in the West have treated it with far less urgency and importance than have our adversaries. ISIS is prolific, working 24/7, tailoring its approach to the individual and nationality it is seeking to influence. The budget over a three year period of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), for example, which I headed for three years equaled cumulatively the cost of just one Reaper drone. It accomplished some good things with small amounts of money but was always outnumbered and outgunned in the very specific space we are talking about. We need to fund a media counteroffensive appropriately. We don't need to break the bank to fight this adversary in social media but we do need to spend somewhat more than we have and spend more wisely.

In the highly charged narrow space we are talking about, the good guys are heavily outnumbered. ISIS and its supporters are trolling and messaging 24/7 in large numbers. You need a network to fight a network. The way to address this is to both increase the number of anti-ISIS messengers and to make it more difficult for extremists to communicate freely while recognizing that you will never be able to remove everyone and that the extremists' message needs to be actually confronted. An August 2015 MEMRI report minutely documented how an ISIS hashtag campaign was "hijacked" by anti-ISIS twitter trolls. The hashtag #WeAllGive BayahToKhalifah was massively interrupted with over 50% anti-ISIS material including a sorts of mockery and even a lot of explicit sexual content within 24 hours. This hijacking limited the reach of the ISIS media campaign, caused ISIS supporters to abandon the hashtag and is something that was not happening a year ago at the height of the ISIS media offensive after the declaration of the Caliphate.

Secondly, you need content. ISIS messaging is MOSTLY about a Utopian, grievance laden version of Jihadist Salafism but it is presented in a wide range of tailored ways, many of these approaches are not particularly violence filled.   There has been some incremental progress in this field but not enough. A sarcastic approach on Twitter such as ISIS Karaoke is an interesting small-scale effort but this is not enough. Another recent effort comes from Japan where #ISISchan uses the imagery and language of anime to push the revolutionary concept that "knives are for cutting melons," not heads. There are a number of reformers, liberals and secularists throughout the Muslim world who have been fighting the good fight against extremists, on their own for years even before the rise of ISIS. Maximizing the stories and visuals of the steady stream of individuals disillusioned with the Islamic State is another resource that counterterrorism communicators are aware of but that is still being used too little. There also needs to be some sort of organized "off-ramp" in Western countries where returnees or convicted, repentant supporters can look directly into a camera, like ISIS supporters often do, and relate in their own words how they were wrong.

Much work can also be done in highlighting the voices and stories of Sunni Arab Muslim victims of ISIS violence. The stories of the massacres of the Syrian Shaitat tribe or of the hundreds of Iraqi Anbar province Sunni tribesmen or clerics are yet to be told in the words of those who knew them. There are people today in Syrian refugee camps, on the road to Europe as refugees, or being held as prisoners by friendly governments that can make a more compelling case than we can directly on why joining ISIS is a really bad idea and underscore a basic criticism of ISIS that actually has power, which is that most of its victims are the very Sunni Muslim population it claims to represent. It is also pertinent to mention the heroic work of citizen journalist

collectives such as "Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently" and Mosul Eye, reporting bravely from deep inside ISIS-controlled territory.

Deepening understanding among at risk populations about the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen in the West is still another needed element. It has been a while since I was in school but we generally seemed to do a good job in the United States in inculcating civic values about what it means to be an American to our children. That is not the case elsewhere. I recently spoke to a Northern European citizen who lamented that his country did a poor job in promoting love of country among its immigrant population. The symbols and stories of the nation-state had, because of a fear of extreme nationalism which has existed in Europe in the past, been surrendered and instead of promoting loyalty, pride and inclusion all too often governments promoted nothing, allowing a vacuum to exist which will be filled by others. As Bob Dylan once said, "you've got to serve somebody," and if you can't serve and be proud of the country you are in, you may go and try to find that with someone else.

More can also be done to digitally empower leaders and opinion-makers in at-risk communities (both domestically and overseas) to be able to fund and support their own private, individualized approaches to counterterrorism messaging. This will not all look the same or necessarily say the things we would say, but that is alright as long as there is activity constant over time against those who would radicalize the innocent and lead them to violent extremism. An individualized, handmade approach to counter-radicalization can have power by the very nature of its authenticity and independent nature. The very fact that such an approach doesn't sound or look like what the State Department spokesman would say gives it more, rather than less, credibility.

Radicalization through social media is often not the mass consumption of snuff videos but rather the direction, intimate interaction between individuals who form a bond through cyberspace. There is a role for vetted members of civil society in helping out in a very powerful, unique and individualized way to intervene against these extremist interactions.

Finally, we need to recognize that just like extremists have flourished in the ungoverned corners of the world on the ground – Waziristan, Somalia, Northern Mali, parts of Yemen, the chaos of Syria and Iraq – they have also taken advantage of the mostly ungoverned space existing in social media, in space provided by mostly American social media companies. Not all companies are the same and there has been real progress made, for example, by Facebook in protecting its space from ISIS supporters. Others have done less well with YouTube and especially Twitter being far too open to the incitement and provocation of explicitly labelled propaganda by Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) which should have no place in social media. Both those companies are trying to do better, but they should do more to police the space they control and ensure protection from misuse by FTOs and supporters in what often is abuse of the terms of service of the companies themselves.

  And there are still other online hosts, such as the San Francisco-based "Internet Archive" founded by Brewster Kahle in 1996 which is frequently used by Jihadists as a safe harbor for their material. Surely there has to be a better way to safeguard freedom of expression, preserve online archives, and protect the public from terrorist propaganda. A bright light needs to be

shined on the work of companies so that there should at the very least be an informed and rational discussion of the challenges that democratic open societies face in dealing with the propaganda of violent radicals.

The political pathologies of the Middle East have very deep roots going back centuries which can be addressed and mitigated by Western governments but in the end cannot be solved by them. While the heavy military and political lifting can best be done by governments in the region, many of whom have a longstanding and productive relationship with the United States, there are a series of commonsense, relatively low cost steps that the US government alone, and in partnership with friendly governments, with civil society, and with social media companies can, and should, take to, at the very least, make the work of these terrorists seeking to radicalize the unwary more difficult. As impressive as ISIS propaganda is, the impact has all too often been not because it was so great but because there were little or no countermeasures taken by its opponents.